DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 778 CS 213 018

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TITLE Multi-Cultural Literacy in the Composition Classroom: Report on a Pilot Project.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; *Oral History; Persuasive Discourse; *Racial Bias; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Literacy

ABSTRACT

At the root of the writing problems of most college students is a lack of critical thinking. Students find analyzing an article or essay, writing a review, or arguing persuasively difficult and unpleasant because they have little practice in identifying and evaluating assumptions and reasoning. One solution to this problem, developed by a college instructor, was a course on "multi-cultural literacy," which sought not only to improve students' ability to reason, but also to encourage humanitarian values. In this course, students were also introduced to current debates about the canon, the meaning of cultural differences and the possibility of cultural "literacy." The goal was not to teach students to agree with the teacher, but to encourage their curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness, and critical questioning. The first step of the course was to introduce the controversy over "cultural literacy." Next, students worked on an oral history, and in class, did some basic exercises in "consciousness raising." In addition, students reported to the class on periodicals targeted at particular ethnic groups, or on stories and films about race, gender, class mobility, etc. Finally, after examining the implications of racial and cultural difference in society, the students wrote a paper exploring the definition, history, and implications of an aspect of cultural literacy. Although the class was not altogether successful, it provided ideas for a revised version of the course which will address questions of white identity and institutional racism, and hopefully reduce students' feelings of guilt and defensiveness. (PRA)

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MULTI-CULTURAL LITERACY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: REPORT ON A PILOT PROJECT

As a college composition teacher, I could not have avoided dealing with race, gender, culture and power in the classroom even if I had wanted to. During my first semester of teaching, as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, racial tension at the University burst into the open with a riot in the freshmen dormitories that involved about 2000 students. Ten students were hospitalized. Teachers in the writing program were encouraged to suspend our regular classroom activities to discuss what had happened and why.

The results of these discussions were disturbing. All of my students that semester were white: most had seen the riot and some had actively participated in it. To a person, they denied that racial tension had had anything to do with it. They were reluctant to acknowledge that racism might exist on campus (or anywhere else in the U.S., except maybe the South) and characterized students of color as hostile and separatist. Instead, they accused the media, the university administration, black student groups, their parents and me of "blowing it all out of proportion"--a phrase I've since learned to be wary of.

Each semester after that, I made units on race and gender part of my syllabus. Students read, talked and wrote about their

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experiences with racial and gender stereotypes, about where such stereotypes come from and what purposes they serve. These classes were always difficult: the UMass freshmen were not a particularly introspective group to begin with, and the part of us that holds stereotypes is a particularly ugly one that no one likes to investigate or expose. I often wondered whether I was accomplishing anything constructive by insisting on these discussions.

Still, I kept coming back to them: they began to seem more and more *basic*--especially in terms of teaching writing. When I tell people that is what I do, they often respond, "You poor thing! I bet kids today can't string together a coherent sentence!" This bothers me not only because of the disdain it implies for students but also because syntax is generally not at the root of their writing problems: critical thinking is. The students in my classes find analyzing an article or essay, writing a review, or arguing persuasively for an opinion they hold difficult and unpleasant because they have little practice in identifying and evaluating assumptions and reasoning. (Of course, they are by no means alone in this; it's a problem they share with some of the most powerful and respected people in the country.) Especially that majority of students who don't enjoy reading often seem trapped in their own necessarily limited experience, unable to step outside of it (something like the characters in a Luis Bunuel film I once saw who arrive at a house for a party and then find themselves unable to step over the

parlor threshhold and leave once they have entered).

It seemed to me that a course on "multi-cultural literacy" might focus on exactly this problem: we would be discovering our most hidden, deepest, oldest (we literally drink in our culture with our mothers' milk) assumptions and expermenting with the idea that they might not be the only workable ones to live by. I hoped that this exercise would not only improve my students' ability to reason, and thereby add substance and complexity to their writing, but would also encourage humanitarian values. As I was preparing this talk I happened to be reading Hannah Arendt, who was struck by Adolf Eichmann's total inability to imagine any point of view but his own, to the extreme that when he spoke to his Jewish interrogators, who were survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, he repeatedly tried to elicit their sympathy because he had never been promoted beyond lieutenant-colonel for his efficiency in organizing the transportation of prisoners to the death camps. (Eichmann's criminal lack of imagination also revealed itself in his inability to express himself in any language other than the most empty and irrelevant slogans: "bureaucratese," he said, "is my only language.")

It also seems to me particularly important and relevant to introduce students to current debates in education about the canon, the meaning of cultural differences and the possibility of cultural "literacy." Students often take a passive view of school as a sort of assembly line, with themselves as the final product: teachers screw in the "three r's" in elementary school, paint on

a gloss of history and shakespeare and algebra in high school, and rev up the motor with some professional training in college. They view learning as something that is done to them, performed upon them, and the educational system as immutable and non-ideological. I hoped that presenting education instead as a process with goals and methods would challenge students to become more actively involved in deciding exactly what, why and how they themselves would learn. That famous educator Abbie Hoffman (no relation) believed that if young people today are apathetic, anti-social and materialistic, it is because they have no sense of personal agency: they are convinced that nothing they do can influence or change the world around them. He believed that a remedy for this pervasive spiritual and political depression lay in claiming personal responsibility and actively and directly participating in community.

There's been a lot of debate about whether courses like this "indoctrinate" students into rigid, "politically correct" responses to the world. However, this debate assumes that all approaches to teaching other than a multi-cultural approach are non-ideological and non-political--which is absurd. My goal is not to teach students to agree with me, but rather to encourage in them curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness, and critical questioning--of me and of everything else in this extremely complex world.

Having set ridiculously lofty goals for the new course, I began to design the syllabus. I began the course with an

introduction to the controversy over "cultural literacy": we discussed articles that represented various points of view in the debate, by authors from Ishmael Reed and James Baldwin to Allen Bloom and E. D. Hirsch. The students found this reading extremely difficult. Their first assignment was to write a short paper expressing their own ideas about the controversy, based on both the readings and discussion and their own experience as students.

Next, they began work on an oral history. I was particularly excited about this assignment, in which students were asked to interview someone in their family about his or her cultural background. I hoped this project would give the students "roots" in their own cultural identities and start them thinking about how people are shaped by their cultures, whether they rebel against them or conform to them. In addition, they would practice using an important form of research: the interview. In class we practiced interviewing techniques and developed questions to use in taking the oral histories, read examples of oral histories, and discussed how to shape the raw material of the interview into a meaningful essay.

Most of the students in my classes are freshmen who are living away from their parents for the first time and working on defining themselves independently of family. Although they enjoyed doing the oral history interviews, hardly any of them, in the finished essay, described their interviewee's culture or explored its effects, even though that had been an explicit part

of the assignment. I suspected that, developmentally, looking at themselves (or anyone else) as inextricably part of a group that they'd been born into was probably the last thing the students wanted to do. Their struggle is to break free from all that.

I reasoned that having written the oral history and gained some pride in their own backgrounds, students would feel less threatened by a unit in which we defined and discussed racism: first of all, because white students (who are the overwhelming majority at Emerson) often feel as though their identities are being devalued in such discussions; and second of all, because their research might reveal that they or their family members had experienced prejudice, which might help them empathize with others in this situation. In class we did some basic "consciousness raising" exercises: students wrote about their first memories of becoming aware of race, defined racism and institutional racism, discussed times they had observed or participated in racist interactions, and times they had observed or participated in positive interactions between races. They wrote essays about their own experiences either as holders of stereotypes or targets of them and also reported to the class on a publication that was directed towards a particular racial or ethnic group, such as *Ebony* or *The Jewish Advocate* or *The Irish Times*. Perhaps because they had been prepared for this unit on racism by the other work we had done in class during the semester, the students were more willing to challenge themselves and to question their stereotypes than they had been in other

classes I had taught, both in class discussions and in their written work.

Brown Girl, Brownstones by Paule Marshall is the story of a Barbadian-American girl growing up in Brooklyn during the Depression. It raises all kinds of interesting questions: about race, about gender, about class mobility, about relationships between various ethnic groups, about immigration, about growing up, and about love. I hoped that my students would be able to identify with the main character and, through her, encounter these questions in a new way. The novel helped them to understand how what seem to be abstractions actually affect peoples' daily lives. Similarly, when I showed Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, they appreciated the anger and rebelliousness in the film, whereas they had reacted defensively to such emotions in the work of essayists like James Baldwin or Michele Wallace.

Finally, after this overview of some of the implications of racial and cultural difference in our society, we returned to the "cultural literacy" question. We examined the Lists: both Hirsch's and an alternative one presented in the Gray Wolf Press anthology, *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, edited by Rick Simonson and Scott Walker. For a research paper, students chose one item from one of the lists and, after exploring its definition, history and implications, explained why they felt it was something about which every educated person should know.

This course was a very difficult one to teach and not altogether successful. This panel is called "Teaching in the

Pluralistic Classroom" and I probably don't belong here. My classrooms at Emerson are in no way "pluralistic": most of the students there are white and wealthy enough to afford the college's expensive tuition with little financial aid. As a white teacher in a roomful of white students, one of my biggest problems was making race *visible*. As whites, we often see race only "in relation to": the skin of black or brown or red or yellow people is dark only in comparison to an assumed white norm. Our assumptions about race are like those of a WASP friend of mine when she remarked that she envied me my Jewish upbringing because her family had *no culture*: we whites think only "they" have a racial identity. When I have asked white students to remember back to their first discovery of race, they tell about their first encounter with a person of color. Before those encounters, race does not exist. (Students of color tend to remember early encounters with racial prejudice--for a powerful account of this kind of experience see Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*) Since we were a group of white people, many of my students were puzzled by my desire to think about the meaning of race: the question did not seem relevant or interesting or even askable in such an environment.

I have restructured my syllabus for this class to try to address some of the problems that arose the first time around. This time, we will begin with definitions of race and of culture. In these discussions we will address the questions of whiteness as a norm and of white identity. We will also do a

unit on institutional racism, including a project in which students will research the racial and gender breakdown in their major field of study. I hope that this will demonstrate that racism exists not only in peoples' minds but in the very structure of social institutions, and thereby reduce students' feelings of guilt and defensiveness. At the same time, it may suggest to them other levels in addition to the psychological on which racism may be fought. If they have a clearer understanding of culture, students may also find the oral history project easier. We will discuss the debate in education only at the end of the semester, when students will approach it already having explored some of the effects of cultural diversity. This may make the debate more accessible and meaningful to them. I suspect that this course will always arouse feelings of anger and defensiveness in both me and my students, but despite the difficulties of teaching this subject matter, I still believe it is of crucial importance in an increasingly diverse society.